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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the experience of living and what that means to the development of leadership. The author feels that although childhood is a critical time for the development of leadership qualities, the developmental process is lifelong and does not end with adolescence. Therefore, to raise the leadership potential in society we must work toward enhancing the context in which a child becomes of age and also look to the conditions under which the adult life proceeds. Education for leadership at any level means an education in which life is not just learned about but is fully experienced, closely examined, and deeply felt. The author makes several suggestions for accomplishing this education for leadership. (DDO)

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LEADERSHIP AND THE LIFE EXPERIENCE

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An address by Francis J. Roberts, President of Bank Street College, delivered at the November 27, 1973 academic convocation on the theme "Leadership for Our Time."

I. Thank you very much for those kind words, but frankly, in view of the news from Washington in recent months, I must admit that coming from a small town in that singular state of Massachusetts, being called "Mr. President" doesn't mean what is used to!

What is more, we gather at a time when it is almost impossible to consider leadership itself in positive terms. As the magazines remind us, just ten years and five days ago, the man who then occupied the White House was still outside the range of the assassin's bullet and the climate in our nation was one of bright spirits. And we had hope and faith in the notion of leadership as a positive thing. It was John Kennedy who had said, "What this country needs is leadership, not salesmanship!" Now right he was, and how sad it is a decade later, as we consider what we have been persuaded to buy.

II. Today, what I want to talk about is experience, the experience of living and what that life experience means to the development of leadership.

Ambassador Linowitz has set forth in a most important way part of the crisis that engulfs this, the most dynamic and open society. All around are the signs and sounds of leadership, but like the people in T.S. Eliot's poem, in too many cases these are the hollow men.... "leaning together, headpiece filled with straw...."

What is worse, it is exceedingly difficult to even discern the reality of the leaders. A few weeks ago a letter to the editor of the New York Times raised the dilemma. When speaking inevitably of Watergate, the writer said, "One of the frightening effects.... is the feeling that we can no longer trust in the reality of our experience."

Luigi Pirandello, the gifted playwright and Nobel laureate whose life spanned the last third of the 19th and the first third of this century, spent some of his most creative energy in an examination of the deceptive nature of appearances and the superficiality with which so many seek to explain away the deep experiences of life and to make, in the words of one of his reviewers ".... a neat little conventional drama out of life." As Pirandello knew so well, life is far from a conventional little drama. But he also knew the enormous difficulties of appraising or even perceiving the deeper experiences of life, as shown by those powerful lines from his play, Six Characters in Search of an Author, when he has the leading character say, ".... you know well that life is full of absurdities, which strangely enough, do not even need to appear plausible, since they are true."

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As we follow the headlines of today and study the convoluted lives of our leaders, can any of us doubt the absurdity of the truth that surrounds and engulfs us? In the depths of the depression in 1933, Aldous Huxley composed his prophetic Brave New World, and predicted a time when free men and free societies would have disappeared, not by external conquest and subjugation nor military takeover from within, but by a much more insidious process in which, for example, our leaders would decide for us what we needed to know and then through an elaborate process of delusion and deception persuade us that we knew all, while telling less than all.

The science fiction of yesterday has a way of becoming the reality of today, and Huxley's prophetic view of the future from the Thirties seems too close for comfort. Another vision of the future, George Orwell's 1984, anticipated the debasement of language in which words and concepts lose their meaning, and by a perverse dialectic become truly the "opposite of their own opposite" -- war means peace, love means hate, lies mean truth, and slavery means freedom. With this kind of world so near at hand, is 1984 far behind?

1984 is getting painfully close, and we had best realize how far down the path we have gone, how deeply we are conditioned to the process of self-deception and acquiescence to authority and just plain indifference.

Recently, I attended the legislative session of a large professional organization. For my taste, all too much of the meeting consisted of mumbled approval of previously unseen resolutions, some of which were quite important.

Later when I muttered a few complaints to the effect that we ourselves should take such matters more seriously, a colleague sought to reassure me with the remark that, "... all legislative bodies work that way." Sad and also true. But I'll tell you one thing, the Constitution was not so composed and so approved, nor was the Bill of Rights, nor the 1954 Supreme Court decision, nor a lot of other important things!

In a remark that goes far to explain the place of the individual in organizations, the distinguished analyst, Rollo May, said in a speech at Bank Street College nearly twenty years ago, ".... the integrity and power of the person tends to be lost in our day because we have so emphasized the mechanical, deterministic elements in man that he now tends to view himself as, in truth, a machine. Western society particularly in the last century, has tended to treat man as an object of calculation and control; anxiety-ridden modern people, unable to find secure resources within themselves, have been forced to learn all too well how to adjust and be controlled."

Who has failed to notice in the last two weeks how readily members of both national parties have rushed to the White House to be reassured that the events of the last year were really just a little misunderstanding? And more startling, who has failed to notice how quickly some of the participants accept this proffered "new" insight; how readily they submit to adjustment and control? Part of the speedy acquiescence to authority shows how desperately we need leadership, and as a result how willing we are to accept without question the mystique of the leader, regardless of his message.

III. What do I mean by leadership? First let me tell you what I mean by the term leader, because my reference point is not only the most obvious status positions such as presidents and principals of schools. The kind of leader I am talking about today is you, your children, your neighbor; I mean parents, helpers in day care centers, secretaries, teachers. I mean the kind of people who stand ready to assume the large and the small roles of leadership, the people who will seek and sense the way in which a school, a state, a family, or a society can be made better and more sensitive to people or can, in the harshest and most negative sense, exploit the lives of others. For what is needed in our time is not a few great and grand leaders, but the qualities of leadership in every person, the potential in every person to enhance his own life by an ability to help others. Only then can we really begin to see a flourishing of all that can be rich and full of meaning in the lives of people. So to begin today, one fundamental building block I want to set before you is this: Leadership means giving up something of one's self to become more than one's self. It means sharing; it means that for status leaders one of the central responsibilities is to release the leadership talents in others. It means sharing talent and sharing authority. It means at its base, the encouragement of the continued growth of all with whom we associate.

But what are the prospects? Can we really expect the self-conscious animal called human to be serious about sharing more of himself? That's a tough question. It depends a lot on how we view the experience of our own lives. One snowy day last winter I got to thinking about how human beings make sense of their own life experiences. I was perched up on the third floor of an old building on the Yale Campus where I was spending a term as Research Fellow. Snowy days urge me on to philosophical planes, and I found myself typing this sentence: "Measured against the infinities of time and space, the longest human life is but a moment, but for the individual person, that moment is the whole ball game, is it not?" I let the sentence swirl around in my mind.

Having written that sentence, I might well have taken the sheet of paper from my typewriter, and question in hand, spent the rest of my life in an endless round of intellectual dialogues. I could have gone from the department of chemistry to the divinity school, from the Yale hockey rink to the hospital of the medical school, from biology to philosophy, from the art studio to the computer lab, and so on around the campus. From such a survey of the formal dimensions of life experience, I would no doubt learn a great deal about the subtleties of the classification of experience, but perhaps the most important thing would be a larger message, the message that the most important components of the life experience are not to be found in endless intellectual speculation or in separate compartments of knowledge, not in the head alone nor in the heart alone, but in the whole experience of living.

There is a message here too for the development of leadership. Only through actual life experiences do we confront the reality which theory seeks to describe. For example, I never felt less like a leader than the day eight years ago when I was standing in the corridor of a hospital maternity unit and the nurse handed me a squirming, six pound bundle my wife and I had named Elizabeth Susan Roberts. Elizabeth was just 72 hours old. Nothing in my experience had really prepared me for this moment. There was no way to describe the rush of thoughts that filled my mind. Years of teaching other people's children, a life study of human development, and a hand-full of degrees all left me stranded.

Trembling, I very, very carefully began to creep toward the elevator which would take us down to our waiting car. At that moment, our physician and friend happened to come by and noted the scene and the look of alarm on my face. "You know, Fran, babies are really very tough little animals," he said with a twinkle. Somehow, this little statement was enough to reassure me, and I relaxed and stepped out confidently. Later I asked myself why it was, that despite all my knowledge and experience with children, I was so startled by those few moments when I first held little Elizabeth. My answer was that although I had been responsible for hundreds of other children, I had never, not for a single moment, had the responsibility for my own and at that moment a whole reel of visions and concepts flashed by. Now prepared was I to deal with the whole period of eighteen years of growing up, the crises, the uncertainties, even the tragedies. I was confronted, in short, with a new life experience, an experience which ran deep into my own psyche and was reflected right to the tips of my fingers. No amount of previous training or assurance, or study made any difference. Nor did it make any difference to know that the event had been experienced by parents since the beginning of the human race. That moment for me was what several of our Dank Street faculty have called, "the blend of an old self with a new experience." That is a concept of deepest meaning to all of us.

But experience in part is what we make of it. You will be assured to know that the thrill of the arrival of our first child did nothing to discourage us, and little Elizabeth was shortly joined by two sisters, now aged five and three. Recently the five of us were gathered at supper and Kathy, age five, was telling us about the climax of a school trip she had taken. It seemed that for days she had been anticipating a journey to an apple orchard, but not really knowing what an apple orchard was, she had been rather unsure what to expect. The conversation at supper went like this, "Kathy," asked Elizabeth, "did you go on your trip today?" "Yes," said Kathy, full of enthusiasm, "but the bus had a flat tire, so we had to go someplace on foot." (Parenthetically, it should be added that the bus indeed did not arrive, so the teacher, sensitive to the fact that the children were disappointed, decided to take them on a walk down a few blocks from here to Grant's Tomb at 125th Street.)

The conversation continued. "Kathy, if you walked, you couldn't have walked all the way to the country, so where did you go?" "Well, we went to a place where there was a big, high stone building, and a wall, and a park." "Well, Kathy," pressed Elizabeth, "what did they call this place?" "I'm not sure what they called it," responded five-year-old Kathy, "but I know they didn't call it an apple orchard!"

Kathy had really made a wonderful point. It seems that having an experience is one thing and making sense of it is something else again. This brings us directly home to ourselves, to some examination of our own nature and the shape of our lives. But just as the dimensions of outer reality are often unclear, so indeed is our own view of ourselves.

IV. For example, what does it mean to lead?

The layman, looking at a person in a position of leadership, may think of the leader as possessed of great confidence and free of doubt. The layman wonders how these qualities he believes he sees come about, since he sees himself as lacking these to the point of being different in some basic ways. Part of the misunderstanding of the layman stems from his misreading of the images he sees. He tends to lump together all leaders and vest them with certain common qualities. The most visible leader, for example, may be one labeled "dynamic" and characterized by apparent assertiveness, decisive acts, brave and conspicuous doings. That such overt behavior may well stem from drastic attempts to compensate for inner fragility is readily understood by persons with appropriate psychological sophistication, but is a point not known to many a man on the street. The layman sees the leader in action, he does not see the subtle process of personal development which brings some persons (too few) to the point where they can release leadership competencies in a fashion which is comfortable and assured rather than engage in sublimation in the grand manner.

Two consequences flow from this. The first is the tendency to turn to the so-called dynamic or conspicuous leader, and in so doing lose a large measure of one's own autonomy in the process. A correlate of this is to assume that only a few can in fact become leaders, a conception which further builds up the myth of the great leader and ultimately leads to the kinds of concentration of power we saw in the Nixon administration before it began to unravel. Parenthetically, what we are now seeing on the national level is less a redress of the classic balance of power and more a broad assertion of the leadership of hundreds of key people in and out of government who now have come to realize the poverty of leadership under the benign or biting whip of the single, great leader.

The personal dimension of the leadership goal is seen in the tension between the publicly expressed reasons why one aspires to leadership and the private reality. Sarason writes: "Whereas custom requires that the leadership fantasy be expressed as an opportunity to do good for others, phenomenologically the individual does not experience his striving only in such virtuous ways. The split between public rhetoric and private thought produces a guilty tension within the individual, aware as he is that what he says and what he thinks, what he wants for others and what he wants for himself, are by no means identical. This guilty tension is initially exacerbated by experiences in which the desire to become a leader runs afoul of means at variance both with private and public conceptions of virtue."

Getting these conflicting strands together is the moment when leadership in practical terms begins to become effective, but the roots of this resolution begin many years before; for leadership is not as some may think, a matter of being born with certain traits, as much as it is a continuing development and understanding of conceptions of one's self in relation to others. To assume adult leadership roles that are open and accepting, one must first come to terms with one's own adult role. But what are the experiences which build toward that notion of critical self-acceptance? What does one recall of this process of growing up as it bears on the later readiness to assume roles of leadership?

The resolution of the image of self in relation to others, the development of an adequate sense of personal identity as an adult, and the beginning of a search for suitable ways and settings in which that firming adult identity could extend with meaning and satisfaction is entwined in the experience of growing up.

Autonomy, a sense of the self, is a prerequisite to assumption of leadership roles, and that process is one that begins at the earliest stages of life. The conditions of initial nurturing, the emotional climate which surrounds one as an infant, the feelings and attitudes of parents, the birth experience itself all may play a part in the way in which one comes to terms with himself and extends or withholds his ability to lead.

These early nurturing experiences are well beyond the conceptual reach of most of us, and can be recovered and examined only with informed assistance and careful skill. In that sense, although we know and accept the fact that the early moments and years of life formed us in lasting ways, most of us for practical purposes will live our lives without a full understanding of what those formulative experiences mean to us.

What we are depends on where we have been. If the objective of leadership development is to make every man a leader in his or her own way, then the process is lifelong. It is rooted in the earliest nurturing experiences of childhood, refined in the growing-up years, and tempered by the fires of adolescence. Unfortunately, we are all too apt to end it there, assuming that whatever we have become by the time we are adults, we will be forever. The process should be viewed as lifelong.

One of the advisory founders of Bank Street, John Dewey, in one of his earliest pieces said that the problem of education ".... is the harmonizing of individual traits with social ends and values."

Let us pick up that process with childhood. That is where we here at Bank Street College have spent so much of our time and energy over our fifty-seven year history. We have spent it demonstrating and examining the conditions of early nurture, call it education, not in the name of leadership development, but that is really what it is, for the kind of leadership we need is one and the same as the buoyant life.

What I am saying is that the press of leadership is much deeper than just the development of a few skills and techniques. It is the need to examine one's whole process of education, it is the life experience in all its complexity. Education for leadership at any level means an education in which life is not just learned about but is fully experienced, closely examined, and deeply felt. Any expectation to raise the leadership potential in the society must, therefore, advance on two paths. The first is to work toward enhancing the context in which a child comes of age, and the second is to look to the conditions under which adult life proceeds. A concise summation of some aspects of these two dimensions of development will be my way to focus the afternoon's discussion and to move theory sharply down to the cutting edge of practice.

First, then, the world of the child. One could get lost for weeks in the welter of words about the process and the goals of education. I do not intend to because there are some central ideas that to me are clear and direct. These are the ideas that have been the essence of the work of Bank Street College from the start. They are applicable directly to the central goal of fostering moral, caring, determined leadership. From a dozen such formulations by Bank Street faculty, I have selected only one paragraph from our description of the nationwide Follow Through Project in which we work with schools in fourteen cities all across the nation. I quote, we seek ".... confident, inventive, constructive, coping human beings. Confident people need the ego strength which enables them to believe in themselves. Inventive people need the capacity to probe, to reason, to organize their thinking processes in order to solve problems. Constructive people need to be sensitive to the rights and feelings of others so as to interact in a spirit of mutuality. Coping people need basic knowledge and skills as well as a deep comprehension of the meaning, rationale, and function of their experiences." To accomplish these basic conditions of leadership, we must seek and support the best possible schools.

Do you know where we are in this search? I'll tell you part of the answer by giving one statistic: In the City of New York only half of the students graduate from high school. Think of that. What on earth can we expect in the way of jobs, or social stability, or safe streets, or any other sign of improvement in the human condition if in the year 1973 a young person growing up in the largest city in the whole hemisphere has only a 50-50 chance of even getting the most casual kind of high school diploma. And New York is no different from other large urban centers and many rural areas for that matter. Statistics such as this point toward social chaos for the next whole generation. Where does it happen? In the high schools? Not much of it, most of the drop-out rate is set in concrete before the child gets into the fourth grade. I'll tell you one place where it happens. It happens at about the age when a child looks around the room and discovers that he cannot read and most others can. From that moment on, he comes to school with growing frustration. Each year it gets worse until the student at the earliest moment drops out. First, by failure to attend regularly; then, simply by not appearing. By sixteen he is marked off the list in school. He is also crossed off the list for the rest of his life in a civilization like ours where high school graduation is an absolute necessity for all but the most self-energized people. To reverse this requires some bold strokes, some new ways of looking at our old style schools. Just a couple of examples: there is no reason on earth why school systems start with kindergarten and run through grade twelve. Let us instead declare that high school ends at age 16. Then, let us see that education up to that point is as potent as we can possibly make it, and that every single student gets a high school diploma whether he wants it or not. If he does not need the diploma today, he may tomorrow or five years from now and should not have to go through the demeaning or difficult routine of exams and night school to get it. He deserves it and our society needs him to have it. He may later go to college or he may not, but he will feel a whole lot better about himself. In short, I would eliminate the drop-out problem by eliminating the category. If any one thinks that such a plan would lower standards, getting such a diploma as an assurance would have just the opposite effect. We do not withhold graduation from grade six, so why grade ten? As to the

period after the end of grade ten, we could develop important programs including work study, early college, career training, public service in hospitals, and so on, along the lines I spelled out for the Fleischmann Commission several years ago. Such a plan merits much more extensive development, but in essence would seek to define a new way of looking at the late-adolescent-early-adult period, one which would treat young people with respect, not as parasites. Interesting enough, we are getting closer to this position. In every high school, students are themselves leaving a year or two early, heading for college, travel, work, or whatever. Rather than just letting it happen, let's lead it. Common sense should tell us that the American system of education was an accidental, unplanned creation, and we should stop defending every dimension of the structure as if it were some kind of divine creation.

Along the same vein, we should take a fresh look at the way in which we allocate resources to schools. If you have not already done so, when you go home, figure out the per pupil cost for elementary and for secondary schools in your district. You will find in every case that the cost is much, much higher in the secondary schools. This is education by the pound; the heavier the student the more costly his curriculum. This is not as it should be. Much of the job has to be done before high school if it is to be done at all. And I say that with great reluctance, because I was a high school principal for six years. So powerful are the traditional assumptions about elementary and secondary school that the State of New York, like most other states, weighs state aid formulas so as to give more money to secondary than elementary schools. This has to be reversed and quickly. Now it would be nice if we could say that we could continue to do all we are now for the secondary schools and also expand the elementary allotments in a big way, but I do not think that is about to happen. This will require some hard thinking about priorities. It means, as soon as resources can be found, these should go to extending downward the starting point of schooling, and that schools and parents should begin planning together the ways in which the earliest years of life, the years when the life-long learning experiences are set, can be made most effective. It means that those of you who are interested in day care and infancy care must look yourself in the mirror and decide whether your motivation grows out of the new concern for the importance of that period of life or whether it stems from legitimate or selfish adult lack of concern for children, and a desire to get them out of the way. The kind of program created will depend on your answer. And we must make the point that the current effort to force mothers of poverty families to go to work while dumping their young children for the day is callous thinking in human terms and poor economic policy in the long run. What we need, and what some at Bank Street are now beginning to define, is a new and more wholesome view of child care based on strengthening the family, not ignoring it. And in the schools themselves, we must find every way possible to insure that the principal and the staff of the school are free from unnecessary central control. As much as possible, we should free each school to develop as a special place for children and parents and staff. And if I could, I would see that the central facilities become teacher centers, not just administrative centers.

What in short I propose we seek is a rebirth of interest in the early years if necessary for a while at the expense of the secondary schools and certainly with a view of changing the emphasis of the school district in matters of school curriculum. If I were a board member, I would ask if all of the schools have similar programs, and if they did, I would know that this is a sign they do not have the autonomy they need.

And what of adults? What is the fate of our civilization to be in the intervening years between the rebirth of the schools at their best in the early years and the time when those young people become adults?

Several thoughts come to mind. First, let us find imaginative ways and means to help adults begin anew on any day of their lives. Here at Bank Street, although a graduate school, we have recently amended our charter to allow us to offer undergraduate credit. We do not plan an undergraduate degree, but we do want to give credit where credit is due, and this means giving college credit to adults of any age who work in some of our demonstration centers as paraprofessionals and who acquire the experiences that deserve credit in life. You should see the new fresh light in the eyes of an inner-city mother of four who has just completed an intensive training period in a day care center and who now has earned some college credit. We have to look at our factories and offices and other work centers and start designing jobs for people. We have to realize that people do not fit in slots, that organization charts are fine for organizations but poor for people. We have to plan working units that are small enough so that people count. We have to stop categorizing adults in stand-pat terms, and instead begin to think of people as always growing. Maybe then, we will begin to reach toward that ideal of adult life so beautifully expressed by Walter Gropius, the architectural genius who fled the Nazi terror and lived to see his art flourish in a free America. He wrote to a group of American high school students a few years before his death, and said in part: "For whatever profession, your inner devotion to the tasks you have set yourself must be so deep that you can never be deflected from your aim. However often the thread may be torn out of your hands, you must develop enough patience to wind it up again and again. Act as if you were going to live forever and cast your plans way ahead. By this I mean that you must feel responsible without time limitation, and the consideration whether you may or may not be around to see the results should never enter your thoughts. If your contribution has been vital there will always be somebody to pick up where you left off, and that will be your claim to immortality."

How different is this idea from the noisy, narrow, and selfish lust for personal power that has in our time so frequently been mistaken for leadership.

V. Leadership, in short, requires a lifelong perspective. Buckminster Fuller says it this way: "Little humans preoccupied with the immediate needs of their physical regeneration have locked their zoom-lens focusing mechanism on the close-ups only, leaving it exclusively to their intuition to remind them once and again in a surprised while of the vast long-distance focusing of evolutionary events."

Let me close today with several summary questions:

First: Why do we not have more of the leaders we need at all levels? Part may be in structures, money, and other factors, but I believe that a root cause is the developmental process, which is lifelong, but which occurs most heavily during the years of childhood and which is echoed and reflected through life, as in the way a parent approaches the interpersonal stresses of child rearing.

Second: Where does the failure of leadership begin? In childhood, in the pre-school years, and in elementary school, and at every single point where one's life is twisted toward success or away from it.

Third: Who is an effective leader? I like to think of a leader as a person who has a good feeling about himself, who finds satisfaction in spending part (but not all) of his time in the setting of his work, who has been prepared in the arts and sciences of his special setting, who knows the joy of competence, and who can encourage others to examine their views and values in a context beyond that of their own, while at the same time respecting other's views and values.

And now, in conclusion, as we go out from this cloistered, academic environment and back to the streets of the inner city, to the sights and smells and sounds of our urban civilization, let us think of the leadership capacity in each person. Let us think of a precious newborn baby in the words of a wise friend "not as only a bundle of impulses but.... as a bundle.... of possibilities."

Thank you.

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